

"A little learning is a dang'rous thing;
Drink deep or taste not the Pierian spring;
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again." Pope.

"If any man shall convince me and show me that I do not think or act aright, I will gladly change; for I seek the truth from which no one ever suffered injury. But he is injured who abides in his error and ignorance." Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

Excerpts from:

A LIBERAL EDUCATION by Charles William Super
(painstakingly adapted from the text available at archive.org)

It is the fashion with the heads of our colleges and universities to seek to attract students by setting forth the pecuniary advantages to be gained by what is called a liberal education. They maintain that four or more years spent in acquiring the best systematic education possible are not only no loss from a pecuniary point of view, but a positive gain rather, since the rapidity of subsequent advancement will more than make up for the apparent waste of time.

Thoroughly convinced as I am of the advantages of a liberal education, no matter how or where obtained, I am fully persuaded that the position above referred to can not be sustained. I am confident if a young man's highest ambition is to get rich, he does not need even the systematic education to be got by passing through a good High School.

The error arises from a failure to distinguish between information and education or enlightenment; between knowledge and culture; between alertness of mind or keenness of intellect and breadth of understanding. One can not acquire an education without a knowledge of books; but the knowledge of what man has done and thought, in a large way and on great problems, is of little use to him who is concerned only how to use the passing opportunity to serve himself.

In order to gain wealth one needs to know what is going on in that particular domain of the business world in which his pecuniary interests are supposed to lie, and very little else. One needs only to know how to take advantage of opportunities for profit as they arise; nothing further. Some of our wealthiest men have not knowledge enough to use their mother-tongue correctly, yet their wealth gives them a temporary influence and a certain though passing importance. Were it not for their wealth they would be nobodies. In such cases money is the man's master and the first consideration when his name is mentioned. Money makes the man, gives him a kind of dignity, secures for him a measure of outward respect, but it can not give him worth.

On the other hand, the primary object of a liberal education is to impart to a man a value aside, from any tangible possessions he may have succeed in getting into his hands and his coffer.

II

An interview with the late Senator Hoar has been widely circulated in which he is reported to have said that his annual income outside of his salary never exceeded two thousand dollars. Yet his character stood so high, and so implicit was the confidence his constituents placed in his ability and integrity, that for almost thirty years he was a representative in Congress of the most enlightened commonwealth in the Union. When first sent to Washington it was through no effort of his own, and his subsequent re-elections came to him unsought. During his entire career he was more or less identified with almost every important measure that came before the body of which he was a member. While others with far less ability used their opportunities for acquiring wealth he sought only to cultivate his own mind and to serve his country most efficiently. That young man who would not rather be the counterpart of the late George Frisbie Hoar than any one or any ten of the intellectual nobodies who have bought their way to political honors, is sadly in need of a change of heart.

The State of New York never gave birth to a more distinguished citizen than De Witt Clinton, nor to one more disinterested. "He was a great statesman in his time, not for money (as they are now) but for the people's good. Millions had been within his grasp while Governor, yet the day after his remains had been consigned to the tomb a set of silver-ware presented to him by the Chamber of Commerce of New York as a token of esteem, had to be sold to liquidate a debt of eight hundred dollars." While Mr. Clinton may have been rather inexcusably indifferent to his private interests, his poverty is far more to his credit than if he had erred on the other side and looked out for himself first.

I do not belong to the class who condemn riches unconditionally; we are ready to declare that every rich man is a rogue or a hard-hearted brute. I can not deny that our country and every country owes much to its rich men and that riches are often honestly gained. But this is the result of shrewdness and intellectual acumen or good luck and not of education. If a wealthy man is liberally educated and enlightened it is a matter of great good fortune to himself and a blessing to the community of which he forms a part; but the two things have no necessary connection with each other.

III.

It is a common mistake to suppose that a liberal education can be acquired at any institution of learning however well equipped it may be with the means and appliances of instruction. The best schools, the most eminent teachers, are but guideposts, or means to an end. They can show us how to lay the foundations of knowledge and where to find the elements of culture; there their power ends. The most valuable acquisitions, indeed the only acquisitions that possess any genuine worth, are those we make for ourselves.

Let us remember that the great men and the great women of the world have learned only the rudiments from others and that with these their education by living teachers ended. A young person can lay the foundations of knowledge at high school, college or university, can lay them broad and deep and firm; but the superstructure must be erected in after life.

The best education obtained at the best school is, speaking by and large, to a greater or less extent, of an artificial character. In the realm of mind it deals with what is more or less remote; in the realm of matter, with forces and conditions in miniature.

In actual life the individual has constantly to face conditions that did not exist quite in the same relation before and has to adapt himself to them or make them subservient to him.

No man was ever made a great teacher by anybody else. It is in the right use of conditions that the successful man differs from those who are to be classed with the failures. Neither was any one ever made a great commander by a military school; yet military schools have proved their usefulness to such an extent that all civilized countries have them. As long as nations shall continue to adjust their disputes by a resort to force instead of by an appeal to reason, institutions that teach the art and science of killing men and rendering human labor useless will continue to find favor with governments.

There is always danger that formal education, that all education conducted according to a preconceived plan, will become stereotyped. It is natural for men to suppose when they have for a long time done certain things in a certain way that their way is the best; it is without question the easiest. They are more concerned about regularity than results. When the young Napoleon first appeared on the field of war he was generally opposed by men who fought battles and expected to win them as they had been accustomed to doing. Not so he; what he aimed at was victories; to gain these he threw all the rules of war to the winds. What he had learned at Brienne and Paris stood him in good stead, but the conditions of actual warfare taught him new lessons every day: that he knew how to use these lessons to his own advantage was what distinguished him from all the commanders of his time.

On the other hand, one of his successful opponents, Bluecher, was a man almost wholly without education. If we were to take his case as typical and as a rule to follow, not only are military schools but all other schools of little use. The same statement may be applied to many successful men in every walk of life.

IV.

The right kind of an education must fit a man for the comprehension and interpretation of the phenomena of the outer as well as of the inner world. Introspection is often no more than a brooding over our own mental states and may easily become morbid. The study of our own mind

is fruitful only when it is made the basis of comparison with other minds. Emerson says that a life of solitude is fit only for a god or a beast. We need above all things to have our intellectual powers trained to the observation of the relation of cause to effect, whether it be in the study of the past or of the present. Nothing else will have so helpful and healthful an influence upon our conduct. The daily acts of our lives, unless we have degenerated into mere creatures of routine or have never risen above it, are hardly more than the perpetual adjustment of means to ends, a continual calculation of probabilities. If we have provided ourselves with such a fund of human experience as will enable us to choose that course which is beset with the fewest chances of failure we have done all that it is possible for our limited powers to accomplish. While it contributes much to intellectual enlightenment to travel, to know other men and other manners, other climes and other conditions, this insight can be gained only by those who have been trained to observe, to compare, to reflect, and to interpret. As Seneca said long ago, whithersoever we travel, we take ourselves along; we can not help making ourselves a sort of measuring line which we apply to all that we see and hear. If then we do not know how to use it, or if it is incorrect, our estimate is always erroneous.

In this respect modern education differs from all that has preceded it. It lays much stress on the careful observation and accurate determination of external phenomena. Apart from a comparatively small number of choice spirits, the ancient Greeks did not greatly concern themselves with anything but man, and only man of the highest type. After they became self-conscious and began to view man apart from eternal nature and to separate the individual from the mass, they were filled with wonder at all the phenomena that came under their eyes. For more than a century the results of their observations kept accumulating. This was the golden age of the Hellenes.

Then, as they fell more and more under foreign domination the keenness of the Greek intellect began to grow dull. The Alexandrian age was still in a large measure Hellenic, but as time passed it became more and more mixed with foreign elements.

For a while knowledge was increased though intellectual power was on the wane. As men came to know more they reflected less and pondered less deeply. They still preserved an interest in the plastic arts, but they no longer had a keen appreciation of the genuinely artistic.

In the oration which Dio Chrysostom delivered before the Rhodians he reproaches his hearers for the vicious custom of changing the inscriptions on old statues in order to honor or flatter contemporaries. Those who wrote or spoke did not concern themselves to tell anything new; they merely endeavored to treat old and well worn topics in a new way. He who could use the largest number of words in discussing the most trifling theme was most admired. The Greeks were still as curious as ever; but theirs was the curiosity of children, not the spirit of inquiry that animates and inspires the scientific investigator. Many new books were written, but they were in a great measure compilations from older ones. Hence it is not without justification that most histories of Greece and Greek literature end with the career of Alexander.

VI.

With the rise and spread of Christianity men more and more lost interest in external nature and in what we may call the natural man. Political conditions for the common people kept going from bad to worse. All their efforts were needed to gain a bare livelihood; they had no time left to think of intellectual culture or to seek it. God only could help the common man; God alone could free him from his own sinful self and save him after he had quitted this sorrowful world.

Since there was little hope of making the world better, the devout could attain perfection only by having as little to do with it as possible, or what was still better, by retiring from it entirely. The spirit of asceticism drove many of the most capable men into solitude. Thus for nearly a thousand years everything that bore the semblance of education was more or less pervaded with the spirit of devotion, with exhortation to heart-searching, to meditation and prayer.

Until within comparatively recent times and in every country of Europe the most widely read books were devotional manuals. These books were conned by millions who read nothing else. It may seem strange that the doctrines and teachings of the first Christian writers could be so perverted and misunderstood; but the fact shows to what an extent objective conditions determine subjective mental states.

The modern tendency in education is therefore a healthful tendency in so far as it teaches the young to look about themselves as well as within; to look forward as well as to look back. It teaches them the power of man over external nature; that human welfare is to a great extent conditioned upon the use he makes of this power. It teaches them not to run away from evil but face it boldly, to fight it and destroy it.

The chief danger is that this tendency may be allowed to carry us too far and we come to believe after a while that the highest aim in life is to acquire the largest quantity of earthly possessions. The immense aggregate of human experience that a young man, even during his minority, can absorb from books ought not only to make him better informed but also better able to regulate his conduct in harmony with the moral order of the world. Yea, it ought to do more: it ought to fill him with the determination to sacrifice everything rather than do violence to this order.

VII.

It is well to keep in mind that knowledge pure and simple is generally useful, or may at least in almost all cases be turned to advantage. There is an education that can not be called liberal but which is nevertheless in the highest sense profitable. Darwin had not the slightest interest in works of the imagination, yet he did more to stimulate thought than any other man of his day. The projectors of the great engineering works which fill the beholder with awe as much as the

wonders of nature, may have absolutely no taste for anything that does not directly concern their business; yet they and their class have contributed and will continue to contribute to the happiness and welfare of men.

We do not wisely when we depreciate one man because he is not another or censure him for not doing one thing when he feels that he can do something else better. Most men are good for something, and blessed is the man who has found his vocation. I may quote here with approval a homely illustration of this truth that I once heard. "I do not find fault with one thing because it is not another. I do not blame a cow for not laying eggs or a hen for not giving milk. Everything in nature has its use, but we should take heed that it is not abused."

The biographical data brought together in "Who's Who in America" have frequently been cited to prove that a collegiate education is an important aid to success in life. The book contains a brief sketch of about fourteen thousand five hundred persons. Of this number seventy per cent have had the advantages of what is called a higher education. Whether the persons whose names are recorded are to be considered the successful men and women of our day depends entirely upon the definition one gives to success. Some very rich men are represented in the volume, but a far larger number known to be equally wealthy are omitted. Besides, it may be that the thirty per cent who had only meager educotional advantages have larger possessions and wield greater influence of a certain sort than the remaining seventy per cent.

On the other hand the men and women whose names appear in the volume may justly be regarded as representing the higher thought of the nation. Nearly all of them have written books or are in one way or another creators and disseminators of ideas that are more or less above the commonplace. But we look in vain for the names of scores and hundreds of rich men with which the press has made us familiar. The book is therefore evidence that a person who has had a systematic education is much more likely to make a mark, however brief its duration, in the world, than one who has not; but it affords no proof and furnishes little evidence that it contributes materially to worldly success.

If we except a score or two of names whose possessors have become wealthy through fortunate investments or by inheritance and who have also literary tastes, it is probable that "Who's Who" represents but a very small part of the material resources of the country in private hands. We should also remember that it contains the names of the members of Congress. These men, as a rule, certainly do not stand for success in any exalted sense of the term; for it is well known that the mere fact of election signifies nothing and that the legislation of the country is chiefly managed by a very small part of the entire body of lawmakers.

It is far better to take the evidence of these statistics for just what they are worth and to refrain from giving them a value that is in great measure supposititious. They demonstrate that the young men and women who wish to count for something more than the millions that are content to live their little day and be forgotten; who place the highest value upon "things of the mind" rather than upon things of the body; and who are concerned about those treasures that perish not in the using, will be greatly profited if they start in life with a systematic education.

IX.

An education may be liberal, as the phrase goes, yet fail to have a liberalizing effect upon its possessor. Above all things it must be a life process, which unfortunately too often it is not. Socrates and Plato and Aristotle insisted on this more than two millenniums ago.

It is to be regretted that the great majority of those who have enjoyed the best educational advantages in early life reach the limits of their intellectual and moral development about the time they have attained their physical growth. They increase in knowledge and experience but their education comes to a stand-still. Saint Paul exhorted the brethren to strive to attain "unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ", not because he thought complete attainment was possible but because striving meant wholesome discipline. In like manner it behooves those who desire earnestly to gain the full measure of educational enlightenment and refinement never to cease in their endeavors after largeness of intellectual vision, and complete freedom from preconceived opinions.

There is no rest for the seeker after truth, but this unrest is the most glorious attribute of man. The power to grasp comprehensively the psychic forces that are about us and to control our inner impulses is within the reach of every one, though not with an equal expenditure of effort or at the same period of life. In early years the impulses are comparatively strong and the regulative faculty relatively feeble. The child can not govern itself except under constraint or persuasion. Ere long however it begins to see the wisdom of using the will wisely. But the time never comes to any of us when we can safely release ourselves from the control of the will. There is much truth in the saying that men are but children of a larger growth. When they can no longer have teachers they ought courageously to assume the duty of teaching themselves.

X.

As the primary and indeed the only object of a liberal education should be a noble life, the man who has been thus educated will not be one thing while professing to be something else; he will not seek to gain a point by understatement or casuistry; he will be fearless in the maintenance of the right and in the defense of the truth because he knows better than anybody else that the truth will ultimately prevail. His life will be regulated upon the principle that it is better to be faithful than famous; honest, than to gain the title of "honorable."

Goethe says, "Let a man be noble, helpful and good, for this alone distinguishes him from all the beings we know." The community does not demand anything of the liberally educated man that it has not a perfect right to ask of every citizen; but it rightfully expects more. The moral virtues know no distinction of class. But the liberally educated man ought to represent the acme of excellence; he ought in a large measure to be a model for those who are less fortunate in their mental

make-up; his influence ought always to be elevating for those who come under it.

Says Coleridge: "To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood, to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day, for perhaps forty years, had rendered familiar; this is the character and privilege of genius, and one of the marks which distinguish genius from talent." It is the high prerogative of an inquisitive mind never to grow old. "The used key is always bright," says Poor Richard. Flowing water never becomes putrid.

Every one can readily recall the names of not a few men now living or recently deceased who preserved their intellectual vigor almost or quite unimpaired up to four score and beyond. Every event in the most uneventful life may be viewed from a different angle since the observer is never the same two days in succession. He is, compared with himself, like the different spectators looking upon a rainbow, it is not the same to any two. Nor is this the sole privilege of genius or even of talent of a high order ; it may be shared by all. It is a brotherhood into which any one may be initiated who is willing to make the necessary preparation and go through the requisite ceremonies.

Genius is spontaneous. It reaches results and forms conclusions without knowing how and without being able to render a reason. It is therefore not an absurd supposition that the diligent searcher after new truth receives more pleasure from his quest than genius, since, to use a homely phrase, he "has to earn what he gets."

The mere laborer, the hewer of wood and drawer of water, though an important part of every state, has usually enough to do and often more than enough, to keep himself from straying out of the straight and narrow path of rectitude, but the liberally educated man not only ought to be able to hold himself well in hand, he ought to be able also to help others. He ought to act habitually according to the maxim, " Do unto others as if you were the others." According to Roman Catholic theology, some persons are capable of performing works of supererogation, that is, more good works than God requires or are necessary to their own salvation. In like manner the liberally educated man should always be ready to do works of supererogation in a moral and intellectual sense. He ought at all times and in all places to stand for that influence which Swift, and Matthew Arnold after him, calls " sweetness and light ".

This immense association to which we must belong whether we will or no, called society, needs intelligent leaders, men who have the lessons of the past well in hand and who know how to use them for future guidance. Surely, there is no sadder spectacle in this world than men and women, whether well or ill informed, whose sole object in life is money or sensuous gratification. If such persons have been created in the image and likeness of God, they have fallen far from their first estate.

XI

Whatever be the factors that enter into a liberal education, there are two and perhaps only two that are essential and indispensable, assuming that a foundation has been laid in a knowledge of the branches taught

in all colleges and reputable high schools. These two factors are represented by history and literature. History sets before us what men have done. It exhibits to us in the most effective way how much sorrow has been brought upon the world by deceit, by ill-advised ambition, by lack of principle and of sympathy in rulers and ruled, by a willingness to sacrifice everything and everybody on the altar of selfishness, preferring immediate gains to the benefits that come to men and to their descendants who regulate their conduct both private and public by the unvarying rules of rectitude. It teaches the inevitable results of a disregard of the fundamental principles of all social and civic life, a principle that all men recognize and acknowledge in theory, but which they too often ignore or disregard in practice, namely justice.*

* *"While of all studies in the whole range of knowledge the study of law affords the most conservative training, so the study of modern history is, next to theology itself, and only next in so far as theology rests on a divine revelation, the most thoroughly religious training the mind can receive."* Stubbs. Cicero calls history the witness of the times, the light of truth, the imperishable memory, the teacher of life, the expounder of the past.

In order to study history profitably it is not necessary to begin at the beginning, though it is best to do so, for the lesson is always the same. We should begin with the history of Greece because it records the efforts of the most highly endowed people that have dwelt upon the earth to solve the same problems, or at least many of them, that still engage the attention of the civilized world. History teaches us that there is no short cut to reforms that all right-minded people advocate and that the social systems of our day are the result of a gradual psychic evolution.

Moreover, a thorough course of training in ancient Greek history is not so huge a task as one might suppose who is not conversant with the conditions of the problem. Even the great work of Grote can be pretty well mastered in a few years by persons who have many other things to do. Then there are the histories of Curtius or of Holm in four or five volumes, and the excellent one-volume manual of Bury, if one does not care to go through the originals from which these works are drawn.

Roman history is almost equally profitable. The sphere of its action is much larger, though the psychic forces that enter into it are less manifold and less complex, at least until the decline of the empire had fully set in. The problems with which the government had to deal kept growing more and more numerous. They could not be solved by adherence to traditional methods and maxims and complete disintegration was the result.

XII

A study of history, especially of those peoples that may justly be regarded as relatively the most advanced, makes it plain as the sun at noonday, except to the blind, that the preponderance has always been

with those nations that possessed the largest number of excellences; though we must not judge any period of the past by the standard of our own times. It is interesting and ought to be profitable to note how uniformly the leading historians have deduced from their studies the maxim expressed by Schiller that it is the curse of an evil deed that it continues to beget itself. Wrong breeds wrong; injustice engenders injustice. This is the inexorable law of civic life.

Moral principles are intuitive, but they need to be developed by organized society, by government, or at least under the protection of government. All government must stand for justice; otherwise it is doomed. Events move slowly; but like the glaciers of geologic time, they are irresistible. The author of the Iliad opens his great drama with an invocation to the epic muse to aid him in fitly setting forth the ruinous wrath of Achilles that brought innumerable woes upon the Greeks. But with the characteristic fatalism of his age, he ascribes them to the will of the supreme god. The point to be noticed is that anger, blind and unreasoning impulse, is the cause of this multitude of sorrows. In another place, however, this same god is represented as saying that men blame the dwellers on Olympus for their misfortunes when in truth it is their own follies that cause them.